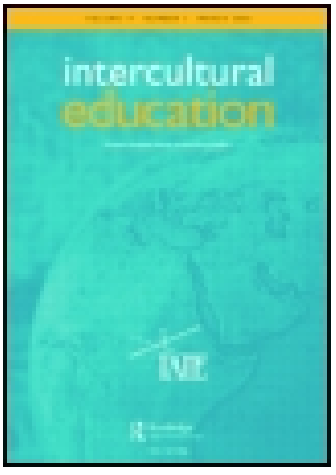

Intercultural Education
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ceji20

Intercultural competencies: what students in study and placement mobility should be learning

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Published online: 28 Jan 2015.

To cite this article: H.E. Messelink, J. Van Maele & H. Spencer-Oatey (2015): Intercultural competencies: what students in study and placement mobility should be learning, Intercultural Education, DOI: 10.1080/14675986.2015.993555

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2015.993555

Intercultural Education, 2015
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2015.993555

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Intercultural competencies: what students in study and placement mobility should be learning

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When promoting intercultural learning in the context of study and placement mobility, intercultural educators are specifying what students should be learning. Research not only confirms the genuine impact of real-life intercultural contact on intercultural learning, but also shows how this impact can be enhanced through institutional support and the integration of intercultural learning into the curriculum. In this position paper, we propose a number of considerations that need to be taken into account in setting learning objectives for mobile students. Referring to research and policy documents mostly in relation to the European mobility context, we address consecutively what students are learning in study and placement mobility; what they say they want to learn; what they should learn for; and finally, what they should be learning. We conclude that intercultural educators should pay heed to what students are actually learning in study and placement mobility over a time span that transcends the current sojourn abroad. We also recommend that educators take steps to support students in mobilising the intercultural skills they acquired abroad for increased employability.

Keywords: intercultural competence; intercultural education; mobility; employability; intercultural learning; Erasmus

Introduction

Learning mobility programmes, such as the Erasmus programme, are seen as having several benefits. Amongst these, mobility is seen as an effective means of enhancing intercultural understanding amongst young people. Part of this relates to the potential impact it can have on people's attitudes. According to Allport's contact hypothesis (1954), contact amongst members of different groups (e.g. students from different backgrounds) can improve intergroup attitudes and reduce negative stereotyping (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002) if four key conditions are met; namely equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation and institutional support. Although learning is not a given and the extent to which it occurs depends on many factors, there is a basic assumption underlying the scheme that increasing intercultural contact facilitates intercultural learning. In addition, research demonstrates that institutional support can greatly enhance the outcomes of intercultural learning when the mobility project is integrated into the curriculum (Bosley and Lou 2011; Cohen et al. 2005). Vande Berg and Paige (2009) correspondingly state that student

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learning increases when intervention training throughout the study abroad cycle is built into the intercultural curriculum. In sum, research not only confirms the genuine impact of real-life intercultural contact on intercultural learning, but also shows how this impact can be enhanced through institutional support and the integration of intercultural learning into the curriculum. In this position paper, we therefore aim to provide intercultural educators with relevant considerations for the development and optimisation of intercultural teaching materials.

To this end, we first discuss how empirical data on what students are learning abroad can provide relevant insights into how intercultural contact attributes to intercultural learning in real-life interactions. Secondly, we wish to address learners' motives for studying abroad, which can be of great value in designing teaching material relevant to the learner. Finally, we argue that intercultural educators should not only focus on the learning outcomes of the mobility experience proper, but also on the outcomes of learning further down the line. In particular, one important objective of promoting intercultural learning and gaining intercultural skills is to enhance employability prospects for graduating students.

What students are learning in study and placement mobility

When formulating what students should be learning, educators should not merely focus on student motivations or policy aims, but should also consider what students are actually learning. Analysing how and what international students are learning in authentic interactions can greatly contribute to defining realistic learning goals and developing teaching materials that effectively support students in realising these goals. We furthermore propose that, in defining what students should be learning, it is relevant to also take longer term learning outcomes into consideration that reach beyond the mobility experience and its immediate aftermath. Studies investigating the intercultural learning of mobile students are generally based on sojourns of a predefined and limited duration, typically curricular exchange programmes lasting from a week to several weeks or short-term degree mobility ranging from several months up to a year (e.g. Pennington and Wildermuth 2005; Anderson et al. 2006; Dervin 2009; Kinginger 2013). To complement studies that focus on intercultural learning during short-term mobility and prior home experiences (e.g. international classrooms and multicultural societies), this paper focuses on an intercultural learning path that does not stop immediately upon return but continues long after. Individuals who have spent numerous and longer periods abroad, including degree mobility and study placements, will have had more (diverse) opportunities to learn as opposed to the novice learners who only have a short international experience situated at the start of their learning track. For instance, as going abroad for the first time can be a 'stressful experience' (Sigalas 2010, 1347), intercultural learning may be overshadowed by first-time anxiety. In future experiences, anxiety will probably be lower, creating a more favourable climate for new intercultural learning to occur.

This also highlights the importance of intercultural learning paths, especially those that encompass the entire experience from before departure to after return (e.g. Beaven and Borghetti 2014). On the one hand, institutional guidance possibly reduces anxiety and stress through better preparation. On the other hand, educators are laying a foundation not merely for the initial stay abroad but possibly also for subsequent experiences, thereby enabling the objectives set out by educators and policy-makers to be reached in the longer term. In fact, although exchange

programmes such as Erasmus typically involve novice learners, many might later continue to do a Master's degree or internship abroad. Correspondingly, Gorka and Niesenbaum (2001) state that participating in short-term courses abroad increases the chance of individuals going abroad for longer periods in the future.

When the aim is, then, to define future learning goals for novice mobile students, it would seem inadequate to base this purely on data collected amongst other novices who have gained limited international experience. Hence, we also need studies of more advanced learners in order to serve as a viable beacon for where novice students are, could and should be headed. This was a main consideration for Messelink and ten Thije (2012) in investigating the so-called Erasmus generation 2.0.

The Erasmus generation 2.0

Messelink and ten Thije (2012) analysed authentic international conversations amongst young adults in Brussels whom they named as the Erasmus generation 2.0. The 2.0 refers to two main characteristics of this group. Firstly, it relates to the times of 'superdiversity' (Vertovec 2007) in which this generation grew up, when technological developments and increasing mobility facilitated continuous exposure to linguistic and cultural diversity, in professional and personal contexts, abroad and at home. Secondly, it refers to individuals who have already obtained a wealth of experience studying and working in foreign countries. All 27 research participants were in Brussels at that time for internships at European institutions, national representations or multinational organisations. They were selected based on several criteria: they were all higher education students or recent graduates who mastered at least two foreign languages and had previously gained two or more experiences abroad. The participants as such represented 16 nationalities, who had studied or worked abroad on average close to four occasions over an average time span of two years and three months, and who spoke on average three to four foreign languages. Given their linguistic repertoires and extensive experience of studying and working abroad, this group had ample intercultural learning opportunities facilitated through real-life intercultural contact.

Based on a conversation analysis of six dinner conversations, the authors aimed to identify intercultural learning and identity processes amongst these young adults, starting from the hypothesis that ample international experience had enabled these individuals to acquire extensive linguistic and cultural knowledge. In contrast to many intercultural encounters in which individuals tend to share the knowledge of, as well as defend, their own cultures (Blommaert 2005), Messelink and ten Thije reveal how their participants share knowledge of the cultures of *others,* while regularly criticising cultural characteristics belonging to their national cultures. In the conversations, cultural knowledge of specific nations was often shared by participants who were not a citizen of the country concerned. Cultural representatives, on the other hand, very regularly tended to display 'resistance' to cultural categorisation (Day 1998) by disidentifying themselves from behaviour and norms associated with 'their' culture. In addition to disidentification, one of the main findings the authors discuss is the intercultural inquisitiveness of the interactants. This refers to new cultural elements and linguistic skills that participants adopted and obtained through previous experiences abroad. It also highlights their abilities to gain cultural and linguistic knowledge in interaction. The analysis demonstrates how both disidentification strategies and intercultural inquisitiveness allowed for the Erasmus

generation 2.0 members to minimise differences and seek for similarities across cultural boundaries, as such enhancing intercultural understanding. The manner in which the interactants handled cultural and linguistic identities, demonstrates self-awareness as well as flexibility and adaptability towards differences. Moreover, it revealed a continuous defining and redefining of their (cultural) identities in ways that allowed for the creation of a common ground. This shows a path very distant from ethnocentrism, possibly one going towards 'constructive marginality' (Bennett 1993) where movement in and out of cultures becomes a crucial part of one's identity.

The study on the Erasmus generation 2.0 reveals that 'expert' learners with multiple study or work mobility placement abroad gain higher levels of intercultural awareness. Since intercultural educators have the responsibility of developing meaningful learning objectives for large numbers of students, we advocate that much more research should be carried out with interculturally experienced student groups. Furthermore, Messelink and ten Thije provide insights into how intercultural learning and understanding actually occurs in intercultural contact. Analysing real-life learning can greatly contribute to setting more realistic learning goals and developing teaching materials that address how these goals can be effectively reached in authentic situations. This highlights the importance of using empirical data to inform the goals we set for novices: data which are based on what students have actually learned further down the line, and use this information as input for developing teaching materials. This brings up the question of how these goals relate to what students themselves want to learn in study and placement mobility.

What students want to learn in study and placement mobility

Student motivations for studying abroad can differ from those that educators or policy-makers believe to be the most important. In their analysis of the IEREST project questionnaire, Asoodar et al. (2014) report that students' main motivations before departure are mostly related to personal matters. They found that students believe their upcoming stay abroad will be successful if it enables them to become more independent and self-confident, and if through the experience they gain another perspective on the way things are done at home. Other studies reveal similar outcomes. In the 2010 Erasmus Student Network survey, exchange students were asked to think back to their plans and intentions before departure. The students' main motives for going abroad were meeting new people, learning about a different culture and developing as a person. The IEREST project questionnaire also asked students to indicate criteria that they considered least important for considering their sojourn abroad successful. Here, feeling European and building a network for their career were amongst the five most frequently chosen items. Further, results show that students do not find understanding how others are different from (or similar to) themselves to be important criteria. However, even though students consider such factors of little importance, they nonetheless constitute the principal aim of the mobility project in the Erasmus + Programme Guide (European Commission 2014, 33), namely to 'raise participants' awareness and understanding of other cultures and countries, offering them the opportunity to build networks of international contacts, to actively participate in society and develop a sense of European citizenship and identity'. Clearly, students' motivations for studying abroad do not entirely correspond to the objectives as set out by policy-makers.

Obviously, it is crucial to listen to the students' voice as one defines learning objectives, designs a curriculum and develops educational materials. Taking the students' perspective into account is also vital for promoting studying abroad to students. However, this should not necessarily determine the impact that educators and policy-makers aim for. Although students might initially find 'understanding of self and other' less relevant, this does not mean their perception cannot change, or more importantly, that their understanding of self and other will not be enhanced in the process. As the data of Messelink and ten Thije (2012) reveal, throughout their various sojourns abroad the members of the Erasmus generation 2.0 had clearly gained 'an understanding [of] how others are different from or similar to who they are', to cite the IEREST project questionnaire (Asoodar et al. 2014). Correspondingly, students may perhaps not value 'feeling European' highly before departure, but this is exactly what the Erasmus programme is set out to change. In other words, even if 'feeling European' might not be a motivation for embarking on a study abroad, it can most certainly remain one of its outcomes. As was found in the research on the Erasmus generation 2.0, its members demonstrated a process of continuously defining and redefining their identities. Therefore, it is important to be aware of what students want to learn but this should not limit educators in formulating long-term outcomes that can be facilitated by study abroad.

What students in study and placement mobility should learn for

In addition to considering what students are learning in the long run, we should also ask ourselves *why* we say students should be learning this. In rapidly changing knowledge societies, where continuous acquisition of new and transferable skills is required, universities are increasingly being held responsible for delivering employable global graduates. This tendency is also reflected in the new Erasmus + Programme (European Commission 2014) where international experience, foreign-language skills and intercultural competencies are advocated as a means of enhancing graduate employability. In order to better prepare students for a future in a globalising world, we propose that curricula and teaching materials should pay attention not only to what is learned during student mobility, but also to how these acquired skills can be mobilised in the world of work. As Zhu (2014, 197) states,

> the practical nature of the field of intercultural communication makes it imperative for intercultural scholars, consultants, educators and students to ground academic discussions in the context of practical concerns, to balance conceptual complexity and applicability in real-life and to embrace a problem-solving approach in dealing with real-life issues.

Bennett (1986) offered a similar view, suggesting that students should not only be able to demonstrate their learning but also to apply what they have learned in creative ways in new environments. When we take this into account in defining what students should be learning, it is then equally important to examine the practical implications, namely to what extent intercultural learning makes students more 'employable', how intercultural learning is valued by employers and what intercultural educators can contribute to achieving this goal.

Employability as a mobility purpose

A main aim of a mobility project, as mentioned in the Erasmus + Programme Guide is to 'support learners in the acquisition of competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) with a view to improving their personal development and employability in the European labour market' (European Commission 2014, 33). In the Commission Staff Working Document *Language competences for employability, mobility and growth*, it is stated: 'Mobility in turn is essential to foster further language learning and improved intercultural skills – thus developing some extremely appreciated skills in today's labour market' (European Commission 2012, 20). Yorke (2006, 8) defines employability as a 'set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes' relevant to employment and states that a student 'exhibits employability in respect of a job if he or she can demonstrate a set of achievements relevant to that job'.

Research demonstrates that worldwide employers, too, acknowledge the importance of intercultural skills for employees. In the 2012 Global Employability Survey, conducted by Emerging and Trendence with over 5000 recruiters in 20 countries from all continents, over 40% of the interviewees identified 'employability' as an important focus for universities. The Culture at Work Report of the British Council (2013) presents the outcomes of a survey investigating how intercultural skills are defined and assessed by 367 large employers from nine countries (Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Jordan, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, the UK and the USA). These employers mostly define intercultural skills as 'the ability to understand different cultural contexts and viewpoints', 'demonstrating respect for others' and being 'open to new ideas and ways of thinking'. Employers ranked the latter two of these skills amongst the top four of the most highly valued skills overall (9–11). The Global Graduates report (Diamond et al. 2011, 5–6) argues that UK students need to gain global competencies in order to compete in the global market and that employers increasingly expect global employability skills in graduates, as well as a global outlook from their workforce, to successfully work across worldwide operations. Potts and Molony (2013) also affirm that graduate employers attach high importance to intercultural and language skills along with international experiences, referring to data from the QS Global Employer Survey Report 2011 which collected perspectives of more than 10,000 employers in 116 countries on five continents.

There seems to be little doubt as to the relevance of intercultural skills for a global market place. Employers increasingly value intercultural competencies, which have become an important ingredient in job interviews at international organisations (Anderson et al. 2006). According to Jones (2012, 7), some of the 'soft' or 'transferable' skills that employers are looking for are in fact developed through international mobility. However, the exact nature of the connection between mobility and the skills required by employers is rarely established. Research in fact reveals that not all employers are aware of the skills acquired through international mobility, and that students are not always capable of verbalising what they have learned in ways relevant to the workplace. Gardner, Steglitz, and Gross (2009, 19) mention that American employers sometimes view the experience of studying abroad as 'academic tourism' and as a result they attach little importance to such experiences in job applicants. The authors add that students appeared to be unable to reflect on how their study abroad experience had helped prepare them for the workplace or to

articulate their experience in ways that were meaningful to employers. They, therefore, conclude that the value of a study abroad experience depends on the students' ability to reflect on and articulate their experiences. Or as stated in the Global Graduates report (Diamond et al. 2011): 'One employer noted that if an applicant says: "I've back-packed round and got drunk" is rather different from: "I've travelled, but actually I've learned something from it"'. In a similar vein, the Culture at Work Report concludes that employers would benefit from ways of assessing intercultural skills while job seekers would 'benefit from presenting evidence of strong communication skills, foreign language abilities and international experiences when competing for jobs' (British Council 2013, 3). Potts and Molony (2013) argue that educational institutions should help students in understanding how learning mobility is valued by employers and how it matches employers' preferences. Gardner, Steglitz, and Gross (2009) suggest reentry programmes where students learn to critically reflect on and articulate their skills with meaningful examples for professional contexts. Jones (2012, 9), finally, poses three questions that are very relevant to the issue of linking mobility experience and intercultural skills to employability. Firstly, to what extent are students able to 'sell' their experience to employers? Secondly, are employers aware of the transferable skills that can arise from international experiences? Thirdly, are curriculum designers and the wider academic community aware that an international learning experience is important in enhancing student employability? The last question is the one that addresses the crucial role intercultural educators can play in familiarising both employers and job seekers with concepts and frameworks, allowing them to verbalise aspects of intercultural competency more easily and effectively. In the next section, we will provide an illustration of one of such frameworks.

What students in study and placement mobility should be learning

As we argued in the former section, although mobility can contribute to gaining the competencies demanded by employers, this does not automatically enhance the employability of graduates. As long as students are unable to demonstrate the value of their international experience to employers, it appears intercultural enhancement modules are not achieving their full effect. This makes it imperative for educators to look beyond the intercultural learning path itself, and to also focus on how students can verbalise their achievements and apply them more easily to professional contexts. The Global People Competence Framework (Spencer-Oatey and Stadler 2009) is one illustration of how learners can be assisted along the way in becoming aware of what they are learning and in formulating in clear concepts the skills they have been gaining.

The Global People Competency Framework

The Global People Competency Framework (Spencer-Oatey and Stadler 2009) is a research based set of competencies derived from actual authentic intercultural situations in professional contexts. It was developed out of the experiences of staff at British and Chinese universities working on collaborative projects and the purpose was to draw out learning from their experiences that could be useful for people embarking on future international collaborations. In addition to specifying a number of personal qualities seen in the Erasmus 2.0 generation (e.g. self-awareness and

disidentification), it identifies and illustrates a number of other clusters of competencies, most notably for handling communication and relationships. These specifications can act as a reference point or checklist for students, helping them gain concepts and vocabulary that can act as aids for both reflection and verbalisation. This enables them, from early on, not only to become aware of, but also to formulate particular skills and competencies that they are gaining whilst abroad. For instance, students studying an engineering course in Belgium were asked to use the Global People competency framework to help them reflect on their behaviour and learning (Van Maele, Vassilicos, and Spencer-Oatey 2013). Two sample student comments are given below illustrating how the competencies in the framework helped them become aware of their own behaviour and their need to make adjustments:

Example 1: Communication competency cluster: Language adjustment

> Language adjustment was the skill that I found useful for understanding my own behaviour. My English proficiency is better than my teammates who are Chinese. When talking with them about the project, I have to put lots of effort to make them understand what I am trying to tell. Sometimes I get upset because they don't understand what I am trying to say in detail way and while working every detail is necessary. So I change my pace of speech. My sentences are direct and in active voice. And I always try to speak with action (sign language) through my hand/facial expression and always try to keep 1 meaning per sentence.

Example 2: Relationship competency cluster: Interpersonal attentiveness

> When I communicate with some foreign students, I hurt them indeliberately sometimes due to my words and jokes. They misunderstand what I mean. Then I am learning to be sensitive and be aware of what their 'faces' are, trying not to challenge them during conversations. Try to appreciate and praise others in communications.

Although the above examples illustrate how students learned to verbalise what they had learned during their international study experience, this in itself is not sufficient. As Gardner, Steglitz, and Gross (2009) point out, students then need to be able to 'translate' those insights into relevant applications for workplace skills and this requires facilitation. They recommend using workshops that include the following elements: discussion of the skills and competencies that employers are looking for in candidates; overview of how to engage in reflective practice; use of one or two student volunteers to debrief (unpack) the students' study abroad experiences; using coaching-oriented interviews that focus on making connections with the individual's stated career goals or interests; practice sessions in which students conduct a debriefing, coaching-oriented interview with one of their peers; and suggestions for ways in which students can show on their resumes the skills and competencies they have acquired through their study abroad and how they can use stories to illustrate them during interviews. By integrating the above into the intercultural learning curriculum, the intercultural learning path can extend beyond personal growth and raising intercultural awareness, to also more positively impacting the employability of students. After all, these are students who upon graduation will be entering a global labour market, and all live in a society where exposure to diversity is a given.

Conclusions

In this article, we aimed to provide relevant considerations for intercultural educators when defining what students should be learning in study and placement mobility.

Based on these considerations, in this final section, we offer two recommendations, namely (a) that, when defining what students should be learning, educators should pay heed to what students are actually learning over a time span that transcends the current sojourn abroad, and (b) that educators should take steps to support students in mobilising the intercultural skills they in acquired abroad for increased employability.

We argued that learning outcomes should not exclusively be based on student motivations or policy objectives but also on empirical data demonstrating what students are learning in real-life intercultural contacts. Not only does this allow for setting more realistic learning goals, it can also contribute to implementing these goals effectively into teaching materials. In defining what novice learners should learn in study and placement mobility, it is also important to take in the learning experiences of students who have already participated multiple times in study and work mobility and have had more opportunities to learn from intercultural contact. If more research was directed at this group of experienced students, intercultural education in student mobility contexts could be more firmly based on intercultural learning that has taken place over a longer term, bringing it more in line with findings that identity processes continue to evolve well beyond the mobility experience at hand.

We also argued that educators should pay attention to the practical use of intercultural skills and consider intercultural learning as a path towards greater employability. While both policy -makers and global employers highly value intercultural skills, students remain possibly unaware of what they have learned and fail to communicate their competences to employers. Here lies an important task for intercultural educators, who should in greater numbers take up the matter of employability in the development of intercultural learning courses and curricula. In sum, it is imperative for intercultural educators not only to enhance the impact of study abroad on intercultural learning, but also to enable students to become aware of what they are learning and to help them to translate this into concrete competencies that contribute to their employability.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the reviewers for their valuable comments. Any remaining flaws and loose ends are obviously ours.

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